The Nisqually Delta:

The estuary and area surrounding the lower Nisqually River comprise what ecologists call an *ecosystem* — a complex, interacting, interdependent community of animals, plants, land forms and climate. For more than a decade the system has been the focal point of conflict. Opinion is sharply divided between those seeking to use the area for a variety of purposes — the "developers" — and those who advocate as little change as possible — the "environmentalists".

Unlike most controversies, this one offers little opportunity for compromise. Human activity of any extent seriously impairs natural systems, especially those as fragile as the Delta.

Just what is all the fuss about; what's so special about this particular piece of real estate? The Nisqually Delta is the largest and one of very few relatively natural estuaries on the West Coast. It supports in various degrees a fantastic abundance and variety of plant and animal life. We know of 50 species of mammals, 200 species of birds, 125 species of fish, and 300 species of higher plants; and they are only the more obvious. Ranging downward on the life scale is a bewildering assortment of lower forms, each an essential link in a vast food chain stretching from microorganisms to whales. It has been shown that a estuary may be seven times as productive as a field of alfalfa.

Perhaps more important than its role as a perpetual protein factory, the Nisqually Delta is an avenue to understanding. Science is only beginning to grapple with the significance of natural systems, the diversity of species, and their implications about the future of human life itself; and the "laboratories" vital to their investigations are being spoiled or destroyed faster than the research can be carried out.

It is possible — in a scenario of the extreme — that the human animal will some day face extinction knowing that

Can we save it?

A local environmentalist shares his views

by Jack Davis

the key to survival was dredged up and paved over out of ignorance. Extreme, yes, but we have gone a long way in that direction in a short time, all in the name of progress.

To the industrialist, on the other hand, the delta's chief attraction is that it is not presently being "used" to any great extent. Open space with salt water access was until quite recently an abundant commodity in western Washington, but it was squandered rapidly with the same absence of appreciation that haunts planners today.

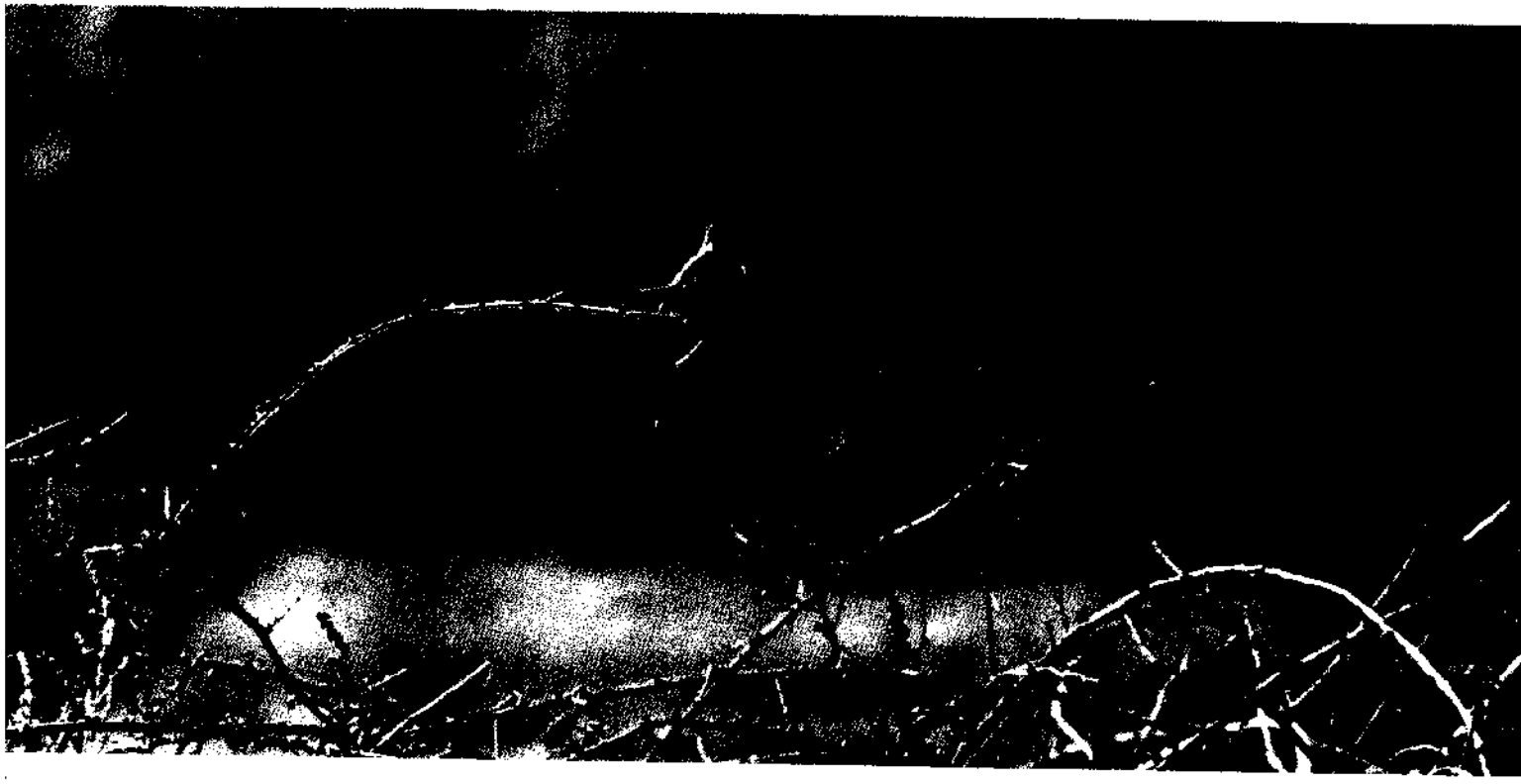
So the prospect of industrial and commercial development, especially in the uplands on either side of the delta, offers a "fair piece of change". It is not an opportunity that the development-minded owners and their allies will relinquish without a vigorous struggle.

Although the delta means different things to different people, the stakes are so high on both sides of the controversy that there is little chance for constructive dialogue. But dialogue or not, an intelligent opinion of the matter requires some sort of perspective. The prospect of a job, a tidy profit from the sale of property, the assurance of corporate growth; of watching birds, conducting research, preserving a quality of life — tangible or intangible, all of these considerations are perspectives from which to judge the issue.

My own perspective is from about mid-way along the north dike of the old Brown Farm, since 1974 the Nisqually Wildlife Refuge. It is a good place to interrupt a five-mile walk for a sandwich and some reflection. The spot is about one-and-a-half miles from the I-5 freeway, just far enough to prevent the noise from intruding.

A rare clear day affords a matchless view. Stretching from west to north at an average distance of 40 miles are the rugged Olympic Mountains. They provide a splendid background to picturesque Anderson Island, only two-and-a-half miles away. At low tide, half the distance is salt marsh and mudflat, ending abruptly at Nisqually Reach whose waters are 200 feet deep. Looking back across the refuge and the distant highway to the southeast looms massive Mount Rainier which, even from 50 miles away, completely dominates the landscape.

High on its slopes the great mountain sustains Nisqually Glacier, source of the river which fashioned the delta, which ends its journey to the sound just a mile to the east of my vantage point. By geologic time reckoning the river is young, but its accomplishments are impressive. Here in its lower reaches the river bluffs are two miles apart and 200 feet high. I suspect that few rivers of comparable size have deposited so much silt in salt water. That's an important element in this whole intricate system.



Over to the northwest just a mile away and across McAllister Creek is Luhr Beach and Nisqually Head. I can clearly see the Washington State Game Department Marine Laboratory from which students from The Evergreen State College have conducted valuable basic research during the past few years. There is a public access boat launch, used primarily by sportsmen.

The game department owns 651 acres of mud and marsh out there which offers some good waterfowl hunting. All of a long one involving many people and groups. While the money that enabled the establishment of the Nisqually Wildlife Refuge in 1974 was generated through hunting, the fact that it was still in a condition suitable for a refuge is a tribute to tireless efforts on the part of citizen conservationists. Time after time they have had to fend off proposals to "utilize" the area for purposes ranging from garbage dumps to superports.

This explains the vehement opposition that two corporate giants have recently encountered in their efforts to industrialize nearby lands. Conservationists of all stripes view such plans as serious threats to the integrity of the Nisqually Delta. They know very well that a refuge hemmed in by incompatable uses is actually a victim of encroachment, that an ecosystem cannot be confined by arbitrary and artificial survey lines.

The delta's protector's are a skeptical lot, an attitude acquired through years of disappointment, deception, and failure. They know that, whatever their other attributes, industrialists have a dismal track record in environmental matters. They know that a company spokesman, however sincere, is qualified neither by experience nor impartiality to assure his company's environmental responsibilities. They know that for the foreseeable future corporate enterprise will continue to operate in conflict with the natural environment, because their priorities, their values, their objectives require it. In short, their *perspective* is wrong.

It is frequently possible from this perspective of mine to experience human solitude, a state that I deliberately seek on occasion. Without the distractions of company it is easier to *see* what I am looking at; to notice sounds that are generally ignored; to observe processes that don't get my attention in the man-made world.

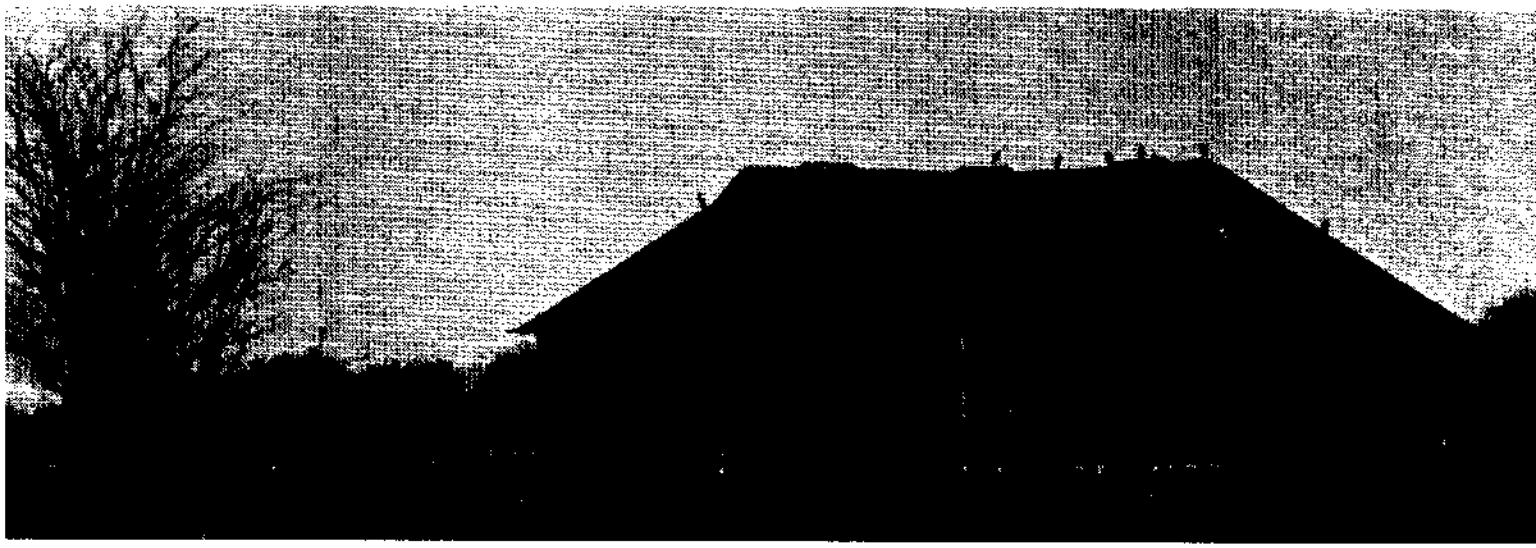
The absence of other humans enhances awareness of other creatures. The delta is alive. The screams of a pair of red-tailed hawks soaring high above; the cries of gulls coursing up and down McAllister Creek; the whistling babble of wigeon on a distant pond.

As I listen, more and more of these sounds of life penetrate my consciousness. A straggling flock of busy bushtits, in the space of minutes, provides a dazzling display of purposeful activity, making me feel ponderous by comparison. The grass at my feet is agitated by scurrying mice. In one of the tidal channels the divers — bufflehead, scaup, goldeneye, grebe — are feeding.

The world most of us inhabit in modern society is one of cubicled space, mechanical noise, time regulated by clocks, communication by telephone, decisions born at conference tables. It affords a poor perspective from which to judge the future of natural systems, because we are insulated from the real world, conditioned by the artificial.

It is not surprising, then, that it is becoming easier as time passes to fall victim to a sort of parochialism. Current fads appear to be permanent values; present economic attitudes assume eternalism. This trend is what makes it so difficult to build a case for preserving natural environments.

Early this year the Weyerhaeuser Company announced the purchase of a 3,200-acre parcel of land in Pierce



which serves to remind me that long before I came this way others were wise enough to appreciate the delta and to do something about it. Most of the nation's wetlands that have gained some measure of protection owe their survival to hunters.

The Nisqually is no exception. The acquisition of that portion called the Brown Farm by the U.S. Department of Interior was with funds that will have to be repaid from money collected from Duck Stamps. Those $5 stamps are required of hunters, and are the source of revenue responsible for conserving most of the wetland habitat so essential to waterfowl and other wildlife. The stamps are for sale at any post office to anyone, and offer an easy and direct way to contribute to additions to the National Wildlife Refuge System.

It takes a lot of stamps to accomplish what is needed. In the case of the Brown Farm, about a third of the total refuge, the purchase price was $1.7 million; and additional revenues will be required to complete the refuge of some 3,700 acres.

The struggle to preserve the Nisqually Delta as a natural ecosystem has been

County. Owned for many years by the DuPont Company, the property's shoreline extends west to the Nisqually Wildlife Refuge and becomes a part of the delta. Weyerhaeuser's plans, still uncertain, include heavy industrialization of the uplands, and a deep-water dock on the waterfront. The company contends, of course, that development will proceed with careful consideration of environmental damage.

The language is reassuring, but the facts are not. First, even if the plans were precise, an adequate evaluation of environmental impact cannot be made without a great deal more ecological information about natural systems. Second, the Weyerhaeuser record in concern for nature is not inspiring.

A short distance west of the Nisqually Delta Burlington Northern Inc. is spearheading the effort to build an industrial park on the open space of Hawk's Prairie. As is the case with Weyerhaeuser, the developers propose a shipping facility on Puget Sound, this one at the site of the Atlas Powder Company near Tolmie State Park.

The Burlington Northern proposal is currently stalled by its failure to comply with the Coastal Zone Management Program. The Thurston County Shoreline Master Program, originally designating the Atlas property "industrial", was rejected by the Washington State Department of Ecology. The County Board of Commissioners subsequently changed the property's classification to "agricultural", which precludes any substantial development. But there is little expectation that the proposal is dead.

The Nisqually Delta presents a classic case in modern conservation. In contrast to the old days when there seemed no end to such resources, we face the harsh choice of saving the best of what remains or robbing future generations of their natural heritage. Environmentalists can make the difference; in the case of the delta, they must.

Jack Davis is a meteorologist for the National Weather Service and lives in Tumwater. Davis is president of the Black Hills Audubon Society and he and his wife, Ada, are members of several other conservation organizations. They have been tireless workers in the fight to preserve the Nisqually Delta from development.